

Interviewer: Evelyn McClure

The tape starts in progress.

EM: Tell me about yourself.

SP: I was born in Chico, California in 1941 and my grand mother's parents lived on a farm out of Chico and were early pioneers. She also had aunts and uncles who lived up in the Paradise area.

EM: When did your family first come to California?

SP: My mothers family came to CA in 1840, there was Daniel Webster Sullivan and Thomas Jefferson Sullivan and there were some Sullivan brothers who settled up in a place called Shastena and Stawberry. My mother was born in Yreka, her mother was born in Stawberry Valley. That was the linkage all being born in California.

EM: Did you go to school in Chico?

SP: I went to school in Chico. My father was in the school business and we traveled. They lived in southern California, Redlund. We lived in Fall River Mills and we lived in Pacifica during my teenage years.

My husband and I got married when I was a junior going to Chico State going for a teaching credential. Moved to San Francisco so he could work, finished at SF state university. Decided it was not a good place to raise children in the city. The flowers were blossoming in Height Ashbury. With two young children, so we moved to Sebastopol in 1964. I started teaching at Pinecrest for two years, my husband was in the JC and then we moved to Sacramento so he could finish his police science degree. And we loved it so much we came back to Sebastopol and I started teaching at Hillcrest School and lived on Bloomfield Rd. Moved into the city after the children started school. I didn't want to be a community parents.

EM: Did you always teach the same grade?

SP: I started out teaching the sixth grade. That's a challenge. Fortunately I then taught third grade. When I moved to Sacramento I taught fourth grade, then at Hillcrest taught fourth grade for a few years. Sitting at a board meeting I heard that there was a class of 22 that was coming up in third grade and I said I want it.

EM: When you get a teaching degree do you also have a major?



SP: No, when I got mine in the 60's there was an education degree and you had to be profiecent in music, pe, literature, science, history.

EM: How did you get interested in history?

SP: As a fourth grade teacher, I've always been interested in family history, but as a teacher we started studying California History. There was a offering of a living history program starting at the Petaluma Adobe training for teachers. All of the applications, for example leatherworking, basket weaving, candle making productions that were done at the adobe, just fascinated me. But basket making was key. They expanded that program to Fort Ross and I would take my classes to Fort Ross and spend the night over there. And to see children experiencing history as it could have been it was just fasinating.

EM: Was it several days or overnight?

SP: One day and an overnight and come back the next day.

EM: Do they do basket making with the kids?

SP: Right, children dress in the costume of the day. Did roll playing, some would be vaqueros, even one time I had a mom kill a chicken. I thought that this was real, we're not going to be buying our chicken at Safeway. So they plucked it and they cleaned it and then we boiled it.

EM: Who would be the people teaching at this living history program?

SP: They were so called experts and some were historians. They did leatherwork and carpentry also.

EM: Did they ever have any Native Americans teaching basket weaving?

SP: No. I've been doing baskets for a long time and Mable McCay was my first native teacher but before that I had classes from Craig Baits who was at Yosemite and was married to a Mono, Me wok Mono. Then Mable was my first teachers. There wasn't a lot of native basket weavers. I think there's been a resergence in the last 25 years. Mable was teaching, native and non native people.

EM: How did you get introduced to her?

SP: Through the man who was the State Historian for the class. And because we were doing this through the parks we wanted to bring out more. So we took a class on materials, culture in Yosemite. A group of us. And also with this man we went down to Marin County.



EM: Mable was teaching where?

SP: San Rafael, in a school near Northgate. I can't remember the name of it. We did like 6 week sessions. And from there I met a woman and she took us out and we did veg digging. And that was really a wonderful thing. So then I started collecting materials. I collected sand mellow and redbud.

EM: Isn't there a ceremonial ritual when natives collect ?

SP: There's always thank the earth and the mother for providing the materials. Now how you do it is up the individuals. Mable never shared her ritual. But she did share and tell us about that and the importance of that. I still follow that to this day. Because I respect the teachings.

She was not a real talkative teacher, look watch what she was doing. She didn't like to be asked questions, but she would look at your work and say well this is not cut fine enough or is not shaped correctly and do it over.

EM: What size baskets did you make in a class like that?

SP: To tell you the truth my basket is not finished. It's about the size of a fifty cent piece right now. It's a willow rod with edge. I still have the edge and the willow. Usually if I haven't finished one at the end of the year I will hurry and finish it, but that one is still incomplete.

My latest Native American teacher, Julia Parker, she was teaching a class. This is a Segwillow Redbut basket. The Redbud is the dark color. The difference here is that this is a twined basket. From Mable I was learning the coil basket.

EM: What's basically the difference?

SP: Coiling you go around and your going over the rods and twining is going in and out between the rod. So your building the basket from the bottom to the top. I've been experimenting with techniques, using both techniques in one basket. Because I've seen some Pomo's that have done that. In some cases it strengthens the basket and the hopas/cradleboards use two layers of basket material for strength. This little one I was doing not going through the rod, because when your using Pine needles your going through the rod and this is the technique that catches the material as it goes around. And this ones going through the rod, this ones catching. So technique is one of the things I play with. Style, color and shapes.

And then my other teachers have been non native people, Kathryn Hubbard. I took Pine needle basket weaving from her.

EM: Are all these people local?



SP: Kathryn is the east bay. She did the Pine needle and I also learned the large, 7 & 8 foot willow rods, weaving those kinds of wicker baskets.

EM: Do you need rods that large to make a large basket for Pine needles?

SP: You could make one from Pine needles. It depends on the size of the bundle, so the size of the bundle give it more strength and integrity in the basket. You have to consider how your going to do it. I've made three wedding baskets, one for each of my daughters.

I started collecting baskets, I have at least one or two from every continent.

I used to show them to the children. One of the things about basketry when I would go someplace I would find berry vines, maybe willow, or maybe rush or some material and see if it would make a basket. So I wouldn't get bored because I would always have something in my hands. My grandmother used to say 'busy hands are happy hands'. So I try to keep my hands busy.

EM: How many hours do you put in when making say a small one?

SP: Well this one I started the other day and I tried to make something small. I started out with three pine needles; well you can see it's about 3" in diameter. It took about 3-4 hours a week, for five days. Now this one I said well I really am going to make it smaller, and so I worked about two hours for two evenings. And I said well that's not even small enough, so now I'm working make a tiny one. This is the one I'm working on. That's about 1/2", just trying to get smaller and smaller. Besides that you can finish them faster and have a product.

I try to keep my collections the same of Native American or mine. I got a book on care of baskets and you really have to be careful to not get bugs or how people handle them.

EM: Do moths like this material?

SP: No.

EM: What do you have to do to preserve them?

SP: I put them in plastic boxes. That just keeps things out. That's what was recommended to me. I do have a book that Sarah shared with me.

EM: Mable McKay, did she share any knowledge about any other weavers in the area?

SP: I think that there were a couple of people in her class; I know there was a woman named Eva Orteiz.



Sylvia Bauman makes clam and abalone shells. I've taken the class from her. I've had my kids do some things like grinding acorns. I didn't say we were doing it exactly as it was but we were doing it as people did for their survival. Trying to be respectful.

EM: Maypalm just put out an article that it's demeaning to think that children can make baskets when it's an adult activity. Here we are in classrooms.

SP: Baskets have been around and natives don't have anything on basketry. They are all over the world and were made 4,000 years ago.

Mable was a dreamer of baskets and never made a basket the same. Her basket making was very sacred to her. And I've had the experience of dreaming of a basket, but mines more of a contemplation of a basket before I begin.

EM: It's an artistic process, I can see that.

SP: It just kind of floats in and says try this. Now Abe Sanchez, my last teacher, he's from southern California and he very methodical in his approach and steps. He always looks through books to find designs. So these baskets that are made in the two mesh fashion and a combination of southwest, I've been looking in books.

EM: So Elsie Allen and Mable McCay, they came up with their own designs. They didn't follow anything that was done before. I thought that they were traditional designs that everybody used.

SP: There are traditional designs, cascade, the triangles, quail knot that is typical of a lot of baskets. You can do it realistically, it's representational art. Although my daughter looked at this one and said that one looks like a lotus mom.

There are designs and there are shapes, but Maple was famous for the canoe shape. I've made a canoe shaped basket. So I have copied shapes, but the iatrical designs, up until this week, I could only study patterns. But making a basket like this, if you throw a stitch another way can change the whole design of the basket.

END OF TAPE